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# USSR Weekly Review

Supplement  
2 November 1977

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USSR WEEKLY REVIEW

SUPPLEMENT

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Soviet Middle East Tactics Since the US-Soviet Joint Statement

Initial indications that the Soviets might moderate their support for the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) in the wake of the US-Soviet joint statement of 1 October do not appear to have materialized. In fact, it seems unlikely that Moscow's support ever wavered. The possibility that the Soviets might modify their position was suggested both by their willingness to exclude an explicit reference to the PLO by name in the statement and by subsequent press commentary which did not stress PLO representation at the Geneva Conference. In the past several weeks, however, Soviet media have resumed calls for PLO representation at Geneva on an equal basis. In addition, there is some evidence that the Soviets continue to maintain close contact with the PLO and that they are not exerting pressure on that organization to modify its position either with respect to recognition of Israel or acceptance of UN Resolution 242.

In the 10 days following issuance of the joint statement, the Soviets toned down their public position with respect to Palestinian representation at Geneva. The media did not carry any Moscow-based calls for participation by the PLO, but did continue to publish such calls by non-Soviets (for example, on 10 October, TASS reported Syrian Foreign Minister Khaddam's remarks that Syria would not go to Geneva if the PLO was excluded). By 12 and 13 October, in broadcasts to the Arab world, Moscow had resumed its own calls for a PLO role at Geneva and, by late October, Soviet press commentary was asserting that participation of the Palestinians at Geneva through the PLO was an acute political issue which could not be avoided.

Several events probably influenced this policy-line reversion by the Soviets. One may have been the 5 October US-Israeli working paper, which they probably felt undermined the impact of the joint statement and weakened their own role in the negotiating process. At the same time, they probably felt exposed on the PLO

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issue as several Arab spokesmen implicitly criticized their position. In an interview on 8 October with the Lebanese newspaper *An-Nahar*, Egyptian Foreign Minister Fahmi stated that the Soviet Union had changed its attitude toward the Arab cause by failing to mention the PLO in the joint statement. Khaddam's assertion that Syria would not attend a conference without the PLO also put pressure on the Soviets to reaffirm their own commitment to the PLO.

In fact, there is little to suggest that the Soviets ever faltered in this support. The PLO itself did not question Soviet endorsement of the joint statement and had publicly praised the statement as a positive move. This indicates that Soviet policy on the issue had either been coordinated with the PLO or coincided with that organization's views. There is no evidence that the Soviets took the action over PLO objections or that the PLO felt threatened by it or by Soviet policy in general. On the contrary, available evidence indicates that the USSR remains committed to the support of immediate PLO objectives.

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The Soviets remain anxious to play a leading role in the negotiating process and to avoid being excluded. The joint statement drew them back toward the center of

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activity, and they would very much like to remain there. Their press commentary in the past month has, for the first time, noted that there might be a divergence of interests between Israel and the US Government, and an *Izvestia* article of 19 October attributed US participation in the 5 October US-Israeli working paper to the pressure of the "Israeli lobby." This approach enables the Soviets to attack positions they reject while preserving the notion that the Soviet Union and the US can work together to achieve a settlement.

The Soviets continue to want any negotiations to take place within the Geneva framework, where they, as co-chairman with the US, are guaranteed a major role. To this end, they have tried to prevent UN involvement in the negotiating process and have opposed any new resolutions or any alterations in the UN resolutions on which the Geneva Conference is based. During the past month they have not been supportive of the submission of new resolutions to the UN by the Arabs.

The Soviets' position with respect to Middle East peace negotiations remains consistent. They want to prevent progress toward a settlement without their participation, and they want to enhance their own image as promoters of peace talks. They are more interested in this aspect of the process than in actual movement toward a settlement, and they have demonstrated no willingness to expend their political capital in an effort to pull Syria or the PLO into more flexible positions. On the contrary, they have been and will probably continue to be careful not to get out in front of their Arab friends in their negotiating positions.

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Soviet Tactics in the Horn of Africa

In recent months the Soviet position on the dispute in the Horn of Africa has shifted from one of neutrality between its established client Somalia and its newly acquired dependent Ethiopia to a policy that clearly favors Ethiopia. Moscow has shown its favoritism in public statements and by reducing military deliveries to Somalia while providing Ethiopia with large quantities of sophisticated arms.

Moscow has hoped that these tactics will encourage the Somalis to withdraw from Ethiopian territory and negotiate a settlement that would maintain Soviet influence in both countries. More recently the Soviets have increased their pressure on Mogadiscio by floating rumors that Ethiopia--thanks to Soviet equipment and support--will soon be in a position to invade Somalia.

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Ethiopian Prospects for a Counteroffensive

The Ethiopians could conceivably launch air attacks on Hargeisa or conduct a limited counteroffensive in the Ogaden, but it is doubtful that they will be able to mount a major counteroffensive capable of regaining the Ogaden, let alone invading Somalia, until at least well into next year. At present, Ethiopian forces appear to be hard pressed to defend the two remaining towns they control in the Ogaden, Dire Dawa and Harar, and simultaneously meeting the rebel challenge in Eritrea. It will probably take them several months to absorb their new Soviet equipment and reorganize their forces.

Moreover, should the Eritrean guerrillas successfully cut the main road between Assab and Addis Ababa, or even worse for the Ethiopians, deny them the use of the key port and refinery in Assab, Ethiopian chances of eventually mounting a successful counter-offensive against Somalia would decline. This would happen because of the difficulty of obtaining the necessary fuel to run Soviet-supplied tanks and planes without the use of Assab.

Soviet Motivation

Although the Soviets may be willing to support an Ethiopian attempt to regain the Ogaden as one way of forcing Somalia to the peace table and ending hostilities in the Horn of Africa, it is unlikely they would see their interests being served by an Ethiopian invasion of Somalia and seizure of Berbera. In spite of its tilt toward Ethiopia, Moscow probably prefers a negotiated settlement in the Horn that would enable it to remain the dominant foreign influence in both Addis Ababa and Mogadiscio.

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Soviet policy toward the Horn has been founded upon the belief that the USSR could balance Somali and Ethiopian interests and maintain good relations with both countries. When hostilities began in the Horn in late

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July, the Soviet press was silent about events there. Throughout late July and early August, the Soviets tried to mediate the conflict, but were apparently defeated by Somali and Ethiopian intransigence.

On 14 August, the official Soviet news agency, TASS, issued a statement calling for an immediate cease-fire and a negotiated settlement under the auspices of the OAU. The statement was careful not to place blame on either Ethiopia or Somalia. Moscow has returned to this statement on several occasions.

After mid-August, however, Moscow sharpened its criticism of Somalia and increasingly favored Ethiopia. By the end of August, Soviet press commentary left little doubt whom Moscow held responsible for the conflict. Commentaries in *Izvestia*, *Pravda*, and *Za Rubezhom* implicitly criticized Somalia for its invasion of Ethiopia and called for strict adherence to the principles of territorial integrity.

In late August, Somali President Siad, apparently on Moscow's invitation, made a quick trip to Moscow to discuss the situation and enable Moscow and Mogadiscio to clarify their positions.

After Siad's visit the Soviets noticeably toughened their stance. Press coverage became increasingly critical of Somalia. In late September, comments by Gromyko and Brezhnev contained both implicit criticism of Mogadiscio's continued aggression and new calls for peace based on the principle of territorial integrity. Soviet military deliveries to Ethiopia have increased,

Moscow's military commitments to Ethiopia now total about \$681 million. Since 1962, Somalia has received only \$306 million in Soviet military aid. The Soviet Ambassadors to Ethiopia and Somalia have told newsmen and diplomats that the USSR supports Ethiopia and has ceased supplying Somalia with "strategic armaments." In mid-September, the Soviet Ambassador to

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Somalia said the USSR would continue to honor existing agreements but would sign no new contracts so long as Somalia refused to withdraw its forces from Ethiopian soil.

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The Present Soviet Posture

Moscow is still unwilling to write off Somalia completely, because its valuable holdings in Berbera and elsewhere could not be easily replaced. Thus, while not absolving Mogadiscio of responsibility, the most recent Soviet commentary on the Ogaden conflict has tended to minimize Somalia's role and highlight alleged Western and conservative Arab involvement.

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Moscow apparently believes that Somalia will not agree to a settlement so long as it believes it can win, given Somalia's dependence upon Soviet supplies. Moscow seems to believe that curtailing Soviet arms deliveries and discouraging others from filling the void are the quickest way to end the fighting in the Ogaden. Moscow's material and moral support for Ethiopia is probably intended to achieve the same end.

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Soviets may hope that the message would convince the

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Somalis that they risk losing everything if they refuse to accept a **cease-fire** and mediated peace now.

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Should this fail, the Soviets may have little choice if they are to maintain their credibility with the Ethiopians but to strengthen Ethiopia sufficiently for it to launch a counterattack and push back Somali forces.

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